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ABSTRACT

This document focuses on relevance in literature. The question is posed: What are teachers of English doing to help bring about a day when there will be no more politically motivated arson, no more riots, nor more young people shot in the streets or on the campuses? The point is made that there is scarcely a major English author in the 19th century who does not speak in some profound way to one or more 20th century problems. These problems are described as those of living in the modern world, in a rapidly growing industrial, scientific, technological, materialistic, urbanized society. It is claimed that today's most gifted writers tend to ignore these problems because they have given up on the modern world. It is further claimed that the best 19th century writers resemble the best of our youth in their refusal to come to terms with this new age. The document is concluded with a quote from Carlyle to the effect that there are values even in a materialistic world that lead us to live purposeful and aware lives. (Author/CK)

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Nineteenth-Century English Literature and Twentieth-Century American Problems

Bulletin of the Kansas Association of Teachers of English, Vol. 56, No. 2, December 1970.

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Let me begin this day devoted to nineteenth-century English literature by indulging in a favorite trick of one of my favorite nineteenth-century English authors, Matthew Arnold: as Arnold did on a number of occasions in his prose, I am going to quote from myself. The last time a Director of this Conference was trusting enough to ask me to give the keynote address, in 1966, I spoke to you about "The Novel: Literary Criticism and Literary History". On that occasion four years ago, I'm afraid I used the word "relevance," not once but twice, and — since what we say here is widely noted in the world of education and scholarship — may well have been responsible for unearthing that cracked touchstone, which our friend Arnold wouldn't have cared for much. I also said this about those of our students with whom we read novels:

> Few of them will ever be either professional literary critics or literary historians. What they will be is citizens of and participants in a world that seems to be getting all the time more dangerous and violent and uncertain. What can we, as teachers of the novel, do for them before they go out into the world? Imbue them with firm moral values, a strict ethical code, to which they can hold fast as life closes in on them? Certainly not: we are not licensed preachers, and, if we were, whose version of the truth would we preach? No, our job is to get them to understand themselves and the world they live in, to understand the processes by which decisions are made and actions are taken, to understand how men attain what they consider the truth and what they are willing to do in its defense.

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Well, of course I didn't really invent the concept of "relevance" as a key to literary studies, and I am certainly not responsible for the fact that the world, our students' world and ours as well, has indeed grown "more dangerous and violent and uncertain" since I spoke those words for the first time. Events have taken place, all across the country and on this very campus, which would have seemed incredible in 1966. A few yards from where you are sitting listening to me, an arsonist's match six months ago started a fire which very nearly destroyed this Union Building and actually did a million dollars' worth of damage. Less than half a block from the front door through which you entered this morning, a young man was shot and killed in a civil disturbance three months

Professor Worth's article was originally delivered as the Keynote Address for the 18th Annual Conference on Composition and Literature at the University of Kansas in October of 1970. Allusions to that occasion are reproduced here. Professor Worth has written numerous articles on Victorian literature, and a book, James Hannay: His Life and Works. *A recent publication is an essay in* The Nineteenth-Century Writer and His Audience.

ago — a civil disturbance which grew directly out of the violent death of another young man in downtown Lawrence a few days earlier. Many of you, quite possibly, have had experiences in your schools and in your communities recently which make 1966 seem to you, as it does to me, a very long time ago, part of another age.

And that is not the worst of it. What as yet undreamed of horrors will the keynote speaker at the Twenty-Second Annual Conference on Composition and Literature be able to allude to in his speech four years from now? (I hope I'm not being too optimistic in assuming that there will still be English teachers in 1974, and that they will be willing and able to meet then as we have been doing for eighteen years now.) How much more violence and danger of violence will we have to live through in the months and years ahead? Among those whom we attempt to reach in our classrooms, how much more alienation and bitterness will there be before things improve — if indeed they ever *do* improve?

We are not traitors to our profession if we ask ourselves such gloomy questions at a professional meeting in desperate times like these. Indeed, we would be traitors to our profession — and, worse, to our humanity — if we *failed* to ask them. Put it this way. What am I as a teacher of English doing to help bring about a day when there will be no more senseless politically motivated arson, no more riots, no more young people shot in the streets or on the campuses? Am I part of the solution or am I, God forbid, part of the problem?

In three pages of my manuscript, I have come a long way to Eldridge Cleaver from Matthew Arnold. Or have I? Was it not Arnold who wrote of

> this strange disease of modern life
> With its sick hurry, its divided aims,
> Its heads o'ertaxed, its palsied hearts . . . ?

Was it not Arnold who wrote of

> this iron time
> Of doubts, disputes, distractions, fears . . . ?

Was it not Arnold who saw his world as one that

> Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
> Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
> And we are here as on a darkling plain
> Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
> Where ignorant armies clash by night. ?

Was it not Arnold who saw himself as one

> Wandering between two worlds, one dead,
> The other powerless to be born,
> With nowhere yet to raise my head . . . ?

In coming upon these and many other passages by Arnold, one suddenly feels a strange sense of kinship with the author — a sense that like the Goethe of his own "Memorial Verses" he was able to lay his finger on "the suffering human race" and say, truly, *"Thou ailest here, and here!"*: a sense that he was a better diagnostician than he knew, that his reading of the desperate human condition had implications far beyond any he himself envisaged.

And Arnold was by no means unique. There is scarcely a major English author in his nineteenth century who does not speak in some profound way to one or more twentieth-century problems. And why should this surprise us, when we stop to reflect that all of our twentieth-century problems have not only their roots but even their counterparts in the nineteenth century? The great burning questions of our America today were also the great burning questions of that England of long ago, apparently so remote but actually so much like us: the mightiest country in its world, pursuing multifarious commitments abroad while tormented by social problems at home, facing an unprecedented modern age with a strange mixture of confidence and bewilderment. How can we, sensitive men then asked as we do now, go on existing as a nation, as a society, when wealth and power are so unevenly distributed, when — though millions live in comfort and even in luxury — millions lack the bare essentials for a decent life and seem impotent to do anything about this lack? What happens, they asked as we do, to the *people* in a machine age, when institutions — business, industry, government, even schools and universities — become so big and so strong and so remote that the humanity of individuals is all but overwhelmed? What, they asked as we do, becomes of our values and beliefs, the apparently eternal verities of generations past, in an age when science and technology have changed beyond recognition not only the conditions amid which we work and live but also the very assumptions on which man's life in this civilization has been based? If we remember this great fact of our essential kinship with the later Romantics and the Victorians — a fact which our shaggy prophets of nihilism have forgotten, choose to disregard, or most likely never knew — it can even be a source of comfort. I think it *is* comforting to know that certain problems are perennial, or at least of very long duration, bitterly resisting men's best efforts to solve them. This knowledge should not, of course, cause us to abandon our struggle against intolerable evils and injustices, but at least it gives us a proper appreciation of the difficulty of that struggle and renders totally unacceptable the self-pitying laments of those who believe that their generation has been uniquely cursed by having to live in nasty and dangerous times.

Most of us in this hall were born during the first fifty years of the present century. All of us, I daresay, grew up amidst wars, and rumors of wars, and consequences of wars; depressions, and memories and fears of depressions; racial strife, industrial strife, political strife; on farms, ravaged by the elements or stripped of their original functions by changes in technology or agricultural economics; or else in cities, blighted by human greed or human stupidity. All of us have come to expect crisis as a way of life; we are inured to crime and poverty and pollution and racism, to a hideous environment, to cold wars and little undeclared hot wars costing tens of thousands of American — not to

speak of hundreds of thousands of "foreign" — deaths.

That, ladies and gentlemen, has been the story of our lives. We are so used to terror that we have come to view it as normal, and we are really quite calm about it most of the time, at least those of us over thirty are, much as one eventually grows quite calm about an incurable illness. It's certainly there; it's certainly dreadful; but, one way or another, one learns to live with it. And that, too, is the heritage we are prepared to pass on to our students.

But they are not necessarily prepared to receive it from us. For reasons that are too complicated to examine here, they are not willing — as, to our shame, many of us have been willing — to live calmly and respectably in the midst of terror — hypocritically, as if the terror were not there. (I am reminded of a recent *Saturday Review* cartoon, in which one upper-middle-class clubman — pipe in one hand, drink in the other — says to his friend who is looking out the window watching as some youths riot in the street below: "Why can't they lead lives of quiet desperation like the rest of us?") Our students ask, Why should there *be* terror? and, Why can't we get rid of it? And because we — their elders, their teachers, their parents — seem to them so calm, so respectable, so hypocritical, many of them feel that they must indulge in shrieking or freaking to get us to pay attention to them. And they may well be right. As many of you know at first hand, my generation, which grew into consciousness as the shadow of the Bomb spread over a war-ravaged world in the late Forties, was idealistic too, and upset about the obvious gap between our ideals and reality, but most of us were terribly polite in our idealism. And here we are today: in the United States at least, in much worse trouble than we were twenty or twenty-five years ago, or rather much more *aware* of our trouble now than we were then.

One thing that fascinates me about the nineteenth century is that the problems of living in the modern world, in a rapidly growing industrial, scientific, technological, materialistic, urbanized society, seemed fresh enough then that they could still be dealt with intelligibly by concerned poets, novelists, critics, and belletrists. Today, our most gifted writers tend to ignore them, to take them as given and go on from that point, or else to resort to absurdity or obscurity or obscenity — none of which I regard as truly humane — when they attempt to confront them. Like many of us in middle life, such writers have essentially given up on the modern world, thereby failing their readers. The best nineteenth-century writers, on the other hand, resemble the best of our youth in their refusal to come to terms with this new age.

Where today are our Carlyles, weeping over the condition of America as Carlyle lamented over the condition of England in the Hungry Forties?

> England is full of wealth, of multifarious produce, supply for human want in every kind; yet England is dying of inanition. With unabated bounty the land of England blooms and grows; waving with yellow harvests; thick-studded with workshops, industrial implements, with fifteen millions of workers, understood to be the strongest, the cunningest and the willingest our Earth ever had; these men are here; the work they have done, the fruit they have realised is here, abundant, exuberant on every hand of us: and behold, some baleful fiat as of Enchantment has gone forth,

> saying, "Touch it not, ye workers, ye master-workers, ye master-idlers; none of you can touch it, no man of you shall be the better for it; this is enchanted fruit!"

Who tells us, as eloquently as Carlyle told his rapt Victorian audience, that our troubles are basically spiritual, the result of throwing over old creeds without adopting new ones. "The Universe *being* intrinsically a perhaps, being too probably an infinite Humbug! why should any minor Humbug astonish us?" Where today are our Dickenses, showing us in magnificently imaginative terms what happens to people, especially poor and helpless urban people, when they are crushed by big business, big government, big impersonal institutions of all kinds, in an increasingly anti-human and impersonal society?

Consider the supersonic transport plane, the so-called SST. To many thoughtful people today, this seems the supreme example of uncontrolled technology and greed triumphing over humane values, bringing undreamed of speed and huge profit and national prestige, whatever that may mean, at the expense of a cruelly ravaged environment. A very good analogue in the middle decades of the nineteenth century would be the railway, as it is vividly described in Dickens' *Dombey and Son,* relentlessly cutting through, and thereby cutting up, communities like London's Camden Town — destroying the landscape; terrifying all living creatures within earshot by its deafening assortment of noises ("a shriek, and a roar, and a rattle," Dickens repeatedly called it); befouling city and countryside alike with its smoke and its soot and its ashes. Small wonder that the aging Wordsworth fought the coming of the railway to his Lake Country, and that Ruskin — always a foe of inhuman technology and greed — attacked, with bitter irony, the construction of a railroad line in the equally pastoral Peak District.

> There was a rocky valley between Buxton and Bakewell, once upon a time, divine as the Vale of Tempe; you might have seen the Gods there morning and evening — Apollo and all the sweet Muses of the light — walking in fair procession on the lawns of it, and to and fro among the pinnacles of its crags. You cared neither for Gods nor grass, but for cash (which you did not know the way to get); you thought you could get it by what the *Times* calls 'Railroad Enterprise.' You Enterprised a Railroad through the valley — you blasted its rocks away, heaped thousands of tons of shale into its lovely stream. The valley is gone, and the Gods with it; and now, every fool in Buxton can be at Bakewell in half-an-hour, and every fool in Bakewell at Buxton; which you think a lucrative process of exchange — you Fools Everywhere.

There is a delightful shock of recognition when we see that writers like Carlyle and Dickens and Ruskin were confronting problems remarkably similar to ours: that they were not at all the stodgy establishment figures they are sometimes made out to be by the drearier and less enlightened members of our profession, but rather persistent and persuasive opponents of the same inhumane materialism which rightly offends our brightest and most sensitive students.

Now, this can become a kind of game, and if you like you can play it to your heart's content and your knowledge's limit. If pollution happens to be the is-

sue of the day, you can quote your students this sentence from Ruskin: "Every river of England (is a) common sewer, so that you cannot so much as baptize an English baby but with filth, unless you hold its face out in the rain; and even *that* falls dirty." If they are concerned about the Vietnam War, you can point out the amazing parallels between that miserable conflict and the Crimean War, and show them how Dickens' outrage about that frustrating venture resembles our own despair about Vietnam: men pointlessly die abroad, and essential social legislation is neglected at home, supposedly because of the war. Dickens complained in one of his letters that "the old cannon-smoke and blood-mists . . . obscure the wrongs and sufferings of the people at home." In another, he wrote: "I fear I clearly see that for years to come domestic reforms are shaken to the root; every miserable red-tapist flourishes war over the head of every protester against his humbug." And in a third: "When I consider the Patriotic Fund on the one hand, and on the other the poverty and wretchedness engendered by cholera, of which in London alone, an infinitely larger number of English people than are likely to be slain in the whole Russian war have miserably and needlessly died — I feel as if the world had been pushed back five hundred years." And so on.

But of course there are limits, practical and ethical limits, to this game of parallel-hunting. We had better hope that none of our students pipes up too early with the information that Carlyle has been called — wrongly, I think, but not entirely without justification — a proto-Fascist and a forerunner of Nazism. We had better be ready with an answer if we should be teaching Matthew Arnold's *Culture and Anarchy* as a "relevant" book — which, of course, it is — and our students ask us why they should be as outraged as Arnold appeared to be about legislation that would allow a man to marry his deceased wife's sister. What I am saying is that we are not going to be able, and we should not be foolish enough to try, to pass off these Victorians as twentieth-century street people; that — though there are obvious and striking resemblances between their concerns and those of our most aware youth, between their troubled times and ours — there are inevitably differences as well, and we cannot get away indefinitely with teaching them as if they were just like us. In all honesty, we are going to have to concede and explain these differences, and thereby stretch both our students' historical knowledge and their imaginative scope.

But in the end we have to confront nineteenth-century English literature *as* literature. The reason we read, for example, Carlyle and Dickens, and not Marx and Engels, on the suffering of the exploited nineteenth-century English poor in our literature courses is not that Carlyle and Dickens document the grim condition of the working classes better than those two heroes of world socialism, but that Carlyle and Dickens were imaginative writers producing highly effective work that we, as English teachers, know how to deal with, as literature. To deal with it primarily in terms of other disciplines — economics or political science or social welfare or industrial relations — is not only to falsify our own credentials as teachers but also to betray the authors whom we undertake to teach. For Carlyle and Dickens and dozens of others deliberately chose to address themselves to the imaginations of their nineteenth-century readers, to their hearts rather than to their minds, in order to move them, to effect social

change, which is always in the first instance a change in the hearts of men.

Our imaginations are not yet so shrivelled, *our* hearts not yet so palsied, that this literature no longer has any significant impact on us and our students. Let us recognize and joyously accept our fundamental kinship with the major writers of nineteenth-century England. Let us concede that, though we have managed to develop our own peculiar varieties of horror and dread, the world we live in is basically their world, the modern world. Let us learn from them what it is like to confront that world — not anaesthetized with fear, not paralyzed by impotence, not twisted with hate, not frothing in anger, like so many of our contemporaries — but as feeling and thinking men and women, the heirs of a long and noble tradition of arts and letters in which no outrage can be tolerated silently, but in which, also, nothing is entirely new and nothing, therefore, is to be ignorantly feared. Let us not forget who we are. Let us reject the picture of modern man recently drawn by the British critic and novelist John Wain:

> We have now a world population who see life in purely mechanistic terms, people who spend their working lives servicing machines or moving information about, and pass their leisure in absorbing mass-produced entertainment . . . . This dreary swarm of two-legged termites will obviously have no use for art, no comprehension of why men ever created art, because art has as its center the glorious, if desperate, struggle of humanity to assert its identity, to claim that the ground beneath the devine and above the animal is not a mere muddy strip of no-man's land but a sacred central area . . . .

Let us remember that even in an industrial, scientific, technological, materialistic, urbanized world, a world that seems to have lost all faith in any creed but the Gospel of Mammonism, there are values — if we only know where to find them, and I have been suggesting a place where we might — that enable us to lead purposeful and aware lives. I want to conclude with some words Carlyle wrote in 1827, in "The State of German Literature," which I think aptly answer, in their high-flown Romantic way, the charges implicit in Wain's dreary twentieth-century depiction of man:

> In any point of Space, in any section of Time let there be a living Man; and there is an Infinitude above him and beneath him, and an Eternity encompasses him on this hand and on that; and tones of Sphere-music, and tidings from loftier worlds, will flit round him, if he but listen, and visit him with holy influences, even in the thickest press of trivialities, or the din of busiest life. Happy the man, happy the nation that can hear these tidings; that has them written in fit characters, legible to every eye, and the solemn import of them present at all moments to every heart.

During the rest of this day, let us listen.

Lawrence, Kansas
October, 1970

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